

## “In The Year”

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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A young pastor was devastated. Someone he had admired, looked up to, depended on, had died and he felt helpless; lost. Gloom and despondency had settled over him, and he didn't know where to turn. What was he going to do now? The year was 740 B.C., and the young pastor was a man named Isaiah. The one to whom he had looked for strength, who had just passed away, was his monarch, King Uzziah of Judah, also sometimes called Azariah.

Only a few years before this, in 745 B.C. Tiglath-Pileser III had taken the throne of Assyria, to the north and east of Judah. He had immediately initiated a policy of extreme aggression. Almost at once he conquered most of western Asia. Relentlessly he began marching his armies southward toward Israel and Judah each year. It seemed certain that his powerful forces would eventually overwhelm God's people and swallow them up. Later, in 722 B.C., Assyria did conquer the northern kingdom of Israel.

Standing firmly against this Assyrian ruler was King Uzziah of Judah, whose resistance earned him mention several times in the annals of Tiglath-Pileser. Using King Uzziah's alternate name of Azariah, he speaks of “Azriau” or “Iauda,” who seemed to be the head of the resistance against Assyrian conquest. It's one of the interesting and valuable confirmations of the Bible story that archeology provides.

So we read in Isaiah 6:1 these words, which I pray will have deep meaning for us today. “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.” This verse represents a turning point in the young prophet's ministry. He had delivered several messages from God to His people before this, and he had felt secure in the way things were. There had been a “comfort zone” with Uzziah on the throne. He had led a strong policy against the advances of Assyria; in fact it was while Tiglath-Pileser was conducting one of his western campaigns that Uzziah died. But now he was gone. What of the future? Depression and uncertainty clouded Isaiah's mind.

Uzziah had reigned for 52 years, undoubtedly all of Isaiah's life up to this point. (Isaiah ended up serving 60 years himself.) Uzziah's death had occurred early in Isaiah's ministry; it's all he had known. King Uzziah had been one of the better kings of Judah. He was only 16 years old when he took the throne and reigned for more than half a century.

Of him it was written, “And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. He sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper.” II Chronicles 16:4, 5. What a profound statement that is!

Later, though, Uzziah had a spiritual downfall. “But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the LORD his God by entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. So Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him were eighty priests of the LORD, who were valiant men. And they withstood King Uzziah, and said to him, ‘It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honor from the LORD God.’ Then Uzziah became furious; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And while he was angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the incense altar. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and there, on his forehead, he was leprous; so they thrust him out of that place. Indeed, he also hurried to get out, because the LORD had struck him. King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death. He dwelt in an isolated house, because he was a leper; for he was cut off from the house of the LORD. Then Jotham his son was over the king’s house, judging the people of the land. Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz wrote.” II Chronicles 16:16-22.

When King Uzziah died, it was a severe blow to the nation, and to Isaiah personally. He had looked to him for leadership and strength. Uzziah was a stronghold against the assaults of Assyria. He had been a strong arm on which Isaiah had leaned. It was a crushing loss. Reflecting also on the anticipated resistance that he would meet in delivering the messages God would give him, Isaiah considered laying aside the prophetic mantle, giving up his calling. In some ways I feel that our church is in the same situation and shares the same feelings as did Isaiah. This passage of Scripture is relevant to us. This has been an unusually painful year for the Valley Center Church. A year ago we laid to rest our dear brother Warren, a faithful member for decades. His seat remains empty today. The “Investment Program” isn’t the same without Brother Warren.

I can’t recall a year with more funerals! It was about that same time, within a week as I remember, that we participated in the memorial of a schoolmate, Sandy, who passed away after a battle with cancer. That very week there was another dear friend who passed away, making 3 in a space of about 10 days. Only weeks ago we gathered for a memorial for dear brother George Coble. Our dear friend Brother Ralph Gerardo had been laid to rest just weeks before that.

It was while our church was involved in the funeral of Angel Galvez, someone who was just beginning his spiritual journey and then was killed while riding his bicycle at the end of last July, that Linda became sick. I remember so well, as we had the viewing service one night and the funeral the next for Angel, that the service went well into the night, and by the time we were getting ready to clean up and close up, it was nearly 10 p.m. My wife, myself, Doug and Linda were still here, tying up the loose ends. Linda insisted that we leave and go home, and she and

Doug would finish up. How long they stayed, I'm not sure. But she told us that we should go; that was her way.

We didn't know it at the time, but right then dear Linda was very sick, and within a day or two her malignancy would be discovered. A very difficult 5-month journey would begin. My wife and I were scheduled to leave on vacation that week and considered changing our plans to remain behind, but she and Doug wouldn't hear of it. That was her way.

Through all of these deaths, we feel a deep sense of loss. We don't know how we'll face the future. Life doesn't seem the same. That's how Isaiah felt when his beloved monarch, King Uzziah, the one on whom he depended, the arm on whom he leaned, died. Read within that context, this verse has profound meaning, both for a young disillusioned and disheartened prophet who felt that the rug had been pulled from beneath him, and for our church family today. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple." Isaiah 6:1.

What Isaiah needed was a vision of the Lord. He needed to see that God was on the throne. The picture that opened to Isaiah's vision was a scene of the Lord as Ruler. The title that is applied in this verse is "Lord," which is the Hebrew *adonai*, stressing God's rulership, His kingship. In response to what he saw, Isaiah confessed, "Woe is me, for I am undone. My eyes have seen the *King*, the LORD of hosts." Isaiah 6:5. His earthly king, Uzziah, the one to whom he had looked for support and protection, had died and was gone. Now his eyes were opened to see his heavenly King, the Lord, *Adonai*.

He also applies the unique name of the LORD to this heavenly Monarch, *Yahweh* or Jehovah of hosts. We know that because the word LORD in verse 5 is printed in all capital letters. The Lord, the King, Yahweh was sitting on His throne high and lifted up. He is presented as the LORD of hosts, which draws attention to the heavenly armies at his side, ready to do His bidding. Later, one angel from those hosts would smite 185,000 of Assyria's troops as they gathered to attack God's city Jerusalem. It was comforting to know that Heaven's General, the LORD of hosts was on His throne. There was still One in control, still One at the helm, though the storms of life raged. There is a meaningful picture that depicts this very scene that hangs in our church foyer. It was painted by Linda. When you walk out of the sanctuary today, pause to look at it. Make a connection in your mind, and see that Isaiah 6 bears the same message as Mark 4, in which Jesus is shown to be the One who is the Master of wind and wave.

Who was the One Isaiah saw on the throne, high and lifted up? Who was the "LORD," the "Yahweh of hosts" revealed to the prophet? *It was Jesus that Isaiah saw in his vision. Jesus is the "LORD," the "Yahweh or Jehovah of hosts" seated on the throne.* How sad that many do not recognize this clearly presented truth of Scripture! Notice carefully how the apostle John applies this vision of Isaiah 6 to the Jesus Who was born in Bethlehem and walked the dusty roads of Judea. He says of Christ, "But although He (Jesus) had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spoke: 'Lord,

who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?’ Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again: ‘He has blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes and understand with their heart, lest they should turn, so that I should heal them.’ These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.” John 12:37-41.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.” Isaiah needed that! It revitalized his ministry and set him on a course of usefulness for the rest of his career. At the low point of his depression, amidst chaos and calamity, he was encouraged and redirected in his objective.

Others likewise were given a similar picture of God in times of stress or trial. Moses with 70 of the elders ascended the slopes of Mt. Sinai and “saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity.” Exodus 24:10. A hundred years before Isaiah, the prophet Micaiah “saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left.” I Kings 22:19. During the earlier part of Uzziah’s reign, Amos said, “I saw the Lord standing by the altar.” Amos 9:1. The prophets Ezekiel, Daniel and John were given views of God in His capacity of Ruler of the universe. This view of the Lord on His throne, at a time of confusion and uncertainty was critical for young Isaiah. Meaning and purpose were restored in his troubled world. Instead of giving up and losing touch with his task, he was recommissioned in his prophetic office. “Then one of the seraphim (the term “seraphim” means “burning or shining ones” and refers to angels) flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said; ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.’” Isaiah 6:6, 7.

Cleansed by the living coal from the altar, a rejuvenated prophet was prepared to take up his work once more. “Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying; ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I! Send me.’” Isaiah 6:8. Another sixty chapters would be written by Isaiah’s ministry before he would seal his testimony with his martyred blood. According to the Babylonian Talmud, he would be one of the first to fall under the cruel scepter of Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah. We believe his experience is highlighted when the book of Hebrews speaks of those who were “sawn asunder” for their faith.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord.” Death is an unwelcome enemy, an unwanted intruder. Death is the result of sin. It was never intended to be part of the human story, but slipped in on the shirrtails of Adam’s act of disobedience. Though it may not always appear so on first glance, sin and death are indivisible. And though we are not personally held guilty for Adam’s transgression, we participate in the effects of his act. “The living know that they shall die.” Ecclesiastes 9:5. “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin and thus death spread to all men.” Romans 5:12. It is also true that we are sinners in our own account and have worthily earned the wages of sin, which is death.

We live in a world in which death is an inevitability; in fact, we've become so used to it that we have trouble imagining the alternative. Nevertheless, God in His kindness, through the Gospel and the Gift of His dear Son Jesus, has taken the sting out of death. There is hope beyond the grave. I believe it is possible for us to take courage from Isaiah's experience and put ourselves in his place. We may gain a new vista of God's glory through these experiences. It may be that we can say, "In the year that Warren, George, Linda and others died, I saw the Lord, on His throne, high and lifted up. He drew me closer to Him than ever before."

It is when we are confronted by harsh realities of death that sometimes our minds are more open to spiritual realities. We are forced to admit that there is a finality to our journey on earth. We know that no one is guaranteed tomorrow. Perhaps this is what the wise man meant when he advised, "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth." Ecclesiastes 7:2-4. How interesting that the same pen that wrote, "A merry heart does good, like medicine" (Proverbs 17:22) also wrote, "By a sad countenance the heart is made better." Solomon's explanation, "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4) reconciles the apparent contradiction.

For that reason, it is true that funerals and memorials may be evangelistic. There may be people present who would never otherwise find themselves in a church. If somehow, along with a message to comfort the family, a word of hope can be delivered to spark a curiosity in a heart that has shown no interest, if the love of the Lord ministered through the church family is witnessed by others; then the illustration spoken of by Jesus, that the seed must die for fruit to be borne, is proven true.

If a family member, neighbor or friend hears the voice of the Holy Spirit through the testimonies and homily of the funeral service and begins a journey toward heaven because of it, then the death will not have been in vain. If those who may have had prejudice against Seventh-day Adventists and a misunderstanding of our beliefs, come to a funeral service and see that we indeed believe in the Holy Bible, that we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior and that we exemplify His love and hope in His promises, then God can exercise His miraculous ability to bring good from evil. If during the trials and afflictions that precede death, friends and family can witness a courageous spirit, a hopeful countenance on the face of God's child, then the seed of the Gospel may be sown in a way that no sermon could accomplish.

Imagine this scene with me for a moment. Suppose that someone were to come up to Warren, George or Linda on "that day," and say, "My walk with the Lord wasn't what it should have been; I had little interest in spiritual matters. I had strayed from the straight and narrow path. But the way in which you approached the reality of your last illness and death spoke to my heart." Or, "Something that was said at your funeral encouraged me to give my heart to Jesus," If this takes

place, I know what the response will be. Someone might testify up there, “In the year that Warren, George or Linda died, I saw the Lord.”

In the New Testament, Deacon Stephen may have thought that his death served little purpose as the stones began to fly, but there was one young man there who could not erase from his mind the look of peace on the martyr’s face, the calm assurance in his voice, the forgiveness in his dying breath, and God used these things to change the heart of Saul the persecutor to become Paul the evangelist. The apostle’s testimony could well be, “In the year that Stephen died, I saw the Lord.” There may be people that served as nurses, doctors and in other capacities who “saw the Lord” in the faithful witness of God’s people as they faced life’s final trial. Who knows the impressions that have been made upon countless individuals.

As we look back, the Spirit often teaches us that we can “see the Lord” in many of the circumstances and the timing of these events that come upon His children. “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.” Psalm 116:15. Is it not true that George’s prayer was answered, that he would simply pass to his rest while he slept? Just the day before, he had rallied and was able to converse. His mind was clear. And then Saturday night a few weeks ago during his sleep, he fell asleep in Jesus. Given the fact that death is the heritage earned by sin, is it not remarkable and wonderful how our God has in many cases made the step to the grave an easier one than it might have been? Is it not true that dear Linda was spared perhaps months of agony and misery as the cancer would have ravaged her body? Can we not see the merciful hand of the Lord in these things? Even in the cruel attack of death, is His kindness not visible?

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.” As I was sitting at my computer last Wednesday, writing the final paragraphs of this sermon, the arm of my office-style chair broke and I nearly fell to the ground. Flashing through my mind was a lesson: something I was putting my weight on gave way and broke, and I nearly collapsed. That’s what Isaiah felt. That’s what many of us have felt lately. But there is a God in heaven, an Almighty Arm which will never fail us, if we lean on Him! May that be our experience today!

Though we feel keenly the loss of loved ones, though it seems there is no tomorrow, though we may wonder what we will do when someone on whom we’ve depended is taken from us, we know there is Someone on the throne. The Lord, Adonai, Jehovah of hosts is in control. Jesus is His name. He experienced life as we know it. He tasted death for every man and woman. He is the Resurrection and the Life and will soon come in the clouds of heaven to bring from the grave those who have fallen asleep in Him. They shall come back from the land of the enemy. His voice will ring out and the dead in Christ shall rise to glory and immortality.

Until then, we who are left must complete the task He has given us. As we view the Lord on His throne and the brightness of His holiness, we sense our need of cleansing, our redemption from sin. God can do this for us. The living coal from the altar will be pressed to our lips, and the promise made to Isaiah will apply to you and to me, “Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin

purged.” Then we will be prepared to be sent, wherever He directs, in His work of reconciling the world and making ready a people prepared for the coming of the Lord.